


ANNE SCHRAFF

URBAN
UNDERGROUND

The Quality of
MERCY

 SADDLEBACK
EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING

CHAPTER ONE

Alonee Lennox was lying on her bed, looking at old yearbooks from middle school. Her twelve-year-old sister, Lark, joined her.

“Alonee, that’s when you were twelve, like me,” Lark cried excitedly. “That’s a cute boy standing there in the picture with you. You’re dressed funny, in a long dress. And is he in tights? What was that all about?”

“Oh, we had like a fair from the Middle Ages,” Alonee explained. “I was voted queen of the fair. He was voted king.”

Lark looked closer at the four-year-old picture. “Wow, that’s Jaris Spain. He was cute when he was twelve years old,” she commented.

“Yeah,” Alonee sighed. “He’s even cuter now.” There was a wistful tone to Alonee’s voice.

“You like him, huh Alonee?” Lark asked. Lark was slim and pretty with large dark eyes and long lashes.

“Sure, I like him a lot,” Alonee admitted. “We’ve been friends since we were both building block castles in preschool. He was the cutest little boy there.”

“I mean, really, *really* like him,” Lark said. She seemed to have an understanding beyond her twelve years.

Alonee shrugged. She never shared how she really felt about Jaris Spain with any of their friends at Harriet Tubman High School. Sami Archer, Trevor Jenkins, and Derrick Shaw were among her closest friends. But she never came right out and told any of them that she was in love with Jaris. Maybe they knew. Surely Sami knew. Not much got past Sami. But to tell them would have changed the friendship in the close little group. And what good would

telling them do? Alonee always knew that Jaris loved Sereeta Prince. Even in middle school he would look at her with admiration. Now Sereeta and Jaris were dating regularly. There was never any doubt in Alonee's mind that her own feelings for Jaris went way beyond friendship and that his feelings for her stopped short of love.

"You know Alonee," Jaris told her not so long ago, "you're special to me. You're one of my best friends."

And Alonee had replied, "Sort of like a really nice sister."

Jaris quickly replied, "I didn't say that," but that's what he meant. That's all it ever was to Jaris—a deep friendship. He saved his love for Sereeta Prince. When Sereeta ignored him, he loved her. When Sereeta was in so much turmoil over her family problems that she scarcely noticed Jaris, he loved her more. He rushed to her side to help her. When Sereeta finally told Jaris that she loved him too, he soared into the sky with happiness.

“Well,” Lark said, “you kind of love him, huh?”

“I love all my friends,” Alonee responded elusively. She looked at the twelve-year-old boy in the picture, at his the dark, dreamy eyes, at the half smile curving his lips. She saw the vulnerability that was always there. Her heart did a little leap inside her. She smiled firmly at Lark and asserted, “I love Jaris ‘cause he’s my friend, and, yeah, I had a little crush on him. But he’s with Sereeta now, and I’ve gotten over any idea that we might date.”

“You’re really pretty, Alonee,” Lark noted. “You should get a nice boyfriend. *I* think you’re prettier than Sereeta.”

Alonee grinned at her little sister. “I know one thing—I’ve got the best little sister in the world.”

“You go out with Trevor sometimes, huh?” Lark asked.

“Yeah, he’s my buddy too. That’s all it is,” Alonee replied. For a long time Alonee had kept it a secret that she was as crazy

about Jaris as he was about Sereeta. Sometimes Jaris had a look on his face as if he suspected how she felt, but neither of them said anything. Alonee wanted it that way. Once Jaris knew she loved him in *that* way, their friendship would be ruined. Besides, Alonee cared about Sereeta too. They had also been friends all their lives. Alonee didn't begrudge Jaris and Sereeta their obvious happiness together.

"I've got a boyfriend," Lark suddenly confided. "His name is LeBron Mason, and he's a terrific baseball player. *All* the girls think he's awesome."

"Does he like you?" Alonee asked, smiling.

"He told me he hated me," Lark admitted. "but I don't believe that. My friend Jacklyn—she's older than me and she knows everything, especially about boys. She told me that LeBron must like me or he wouldn't have told me that he hated me."

"Sounds like Jacklyn knows her business," Alonee said.

“Yeah,” Lark explained, “she says in the beginning a boy sorta hates the girl he likes ’cause he’s mad at her for making him like her when he doesn’t want to bother with girls. But deep down, he likes the girl and sometime he’ll admit it. But it takes time. That’s what Jacklyn said.”

In the morning, Alonee printed out her science report for Mr. Buckingham. She had written it about the Hubble Space Telescope that was launched way back in 1990. Because it orbits outside Earth’s atmosphere, it can take much better pictures of space. Over the years, astronauts from the United States, Russia, and other nations went into space to do repairs and upkeep on Hubble. Alonee had done a lot of research on the Internet and in the library. She had completed her report last night.

As the sheets came out of the printer, Alonee thought how she liked both her science teachers, Mr. Buckingham and Meredith Sanders. Mr. Buckingham was a very hard grader, but Alonee was a good

student, so she didn't mind. Ms. Sanders was more generous in her grading, and most of the students liked her better.

Alonee tucked her science report into her backpack and started walking to school, as she did most mornings. When it was raining, one of her parents drove her. Usually Alonee walked with Sami Archer who left her home at about the same time.

"Hey Alonee!" Sami shouted from behind. She ran to catch up.

"I just finished my report for science this morning," Alonee said. "It was really interesting."

"I finished mine too," Sami replied, "but Buckingham gonna pick it to pieces most likely. He always finds somethin' wrong."

As they neared Tubman High, Sami remarked, "Look at herself standin' there in front of the school."

Alonee looked up at the impressive statue of Harriet Tubman with a serene look on her handsome face. Sami continued,

“Lissen up, girl. That lady there, she never went to school. She wouldn’t know a microbe from a centipede. She saved folks from slavery. She helped the poor. She died in poverty. Been way over a hundred years now since her time and look, a school named for her right here. There she stands. She on postage stamps, and they even named a ship for her in World War II. She famous all over the world, and she never done a science report or a math test. Girl, we are knockin’ ourselves out every day in high school, then there’ll be college. And in a hundred years you think anybody is gonna know our names or put us on postage stamps?”

Alonee giggled. “You’re right, Sami!”

Just then an old BMW pulled up in front of the school. A tall young man got out on the passenger side. He waved to the driver of the car, a gray-haired man, and then walked toward Tubman High.

“Whoah, look at that boy!” Sami exclaimed. “His grandpa delivers him in a BMW. An old one, but still a BMW.”

“He’s nice looking, from a distance anyway,” Alonee noted. “He’s tall, and I can see him smiling from way over here.”

The young man seemed to be heading toward the science building, where Alonee was going. As she drew closer to him, she saw that he was even better looking than he had looked from a distance. He had light brown skin and close-cropped black hair. His features were classic.

The young man went into Mr. Buckingham’s class and took a seat. Alonee was sitting right behind him.

“Oooooo,” Ryann Kern cooed to her friend, Leticia Hicks, “isn’t he gorgeous?”

Ryann and Leticia came from a small town in Alabama. Their families were close, and they had moved together to start an upholstery business. Ryann and Leticia were inseparable. They weren’t yet comfortable in a large city, and they clung to each other. Now Leticia looked unhappy that Ryann was admiring the new boy. “Maybe,” Alonee thought, “Leticia’s worried that